Delia had the ears of a cat. Where others might hear from a distant room only a vague, indistinct murmuring, she could tell the owner of the voice, their mood, and very often, enough of their words to decipher meaning. She had lots of practice, you see.

She was listening now from her invalid chair in the second story nursery, where she spent every waking hour, to a conversation taking place downstairs in the front hall.

"Is there anything I should know?" Asked a male voice, new to Delia. His words quavered slightly, discomfort beneath a mask of professionalism.

"Madam asks that you not over excite her," came the bland reply from Mr. Coolidge, the family butler. "But let us ask Miss Brown if she has anything to add. Miss Brown," he summoned, "come here. The new parish priest has come to call on Delia and wishes to know if there is anything he ought to be made aware of."

"She ain't no ghost, sir." Miss Brown spoke in her jesting tone, with its usual hint of sourness. Despite her tart nature, Delia liked the housemaid very much, for she saw to it personally that Delia was never short of books, good ones with adventures and pictures a-plenty.

"Delia's a clever girl." Miss Brown went on, "Don't let 'cause she's quiet fool you none. She's a good thing, only a bit prickly from time to time, and who wouldn't be in her shoes, I ask you?"

Delia imagined Miss Brown's emphatic nod then heard her heavy footsteps as the woman trod away, her pail of ash swinging on its squeaky handle. Delia's cheeks flushed with appreciation, and she planned to sneak the housemaid a sweet, or perhaps one of her new silk handkerchiefs.

"The nursery is up the stairs, second door on the left," said Mr. Coolridge.

Delia heard the sound of the newcomer's shoes ascending the stairs, then the nursery door as it creaked wider ajar, and she turned to see a man with a sorry face and ugly cow eyes. He removed his black priest's hat and tucked it under his arm, revealing sparse, stringy hair.

"And how are we today?" Asked the stranger, his tone dripping with sympathy.

Delia wanted to reply, *Cursed by the devil! Enslaved to this chair for eternity, for I would not sing him a ditty*, just to see what his response would be.

Instead, she said quietly, "Well enough, sir."

The man gave a watery smile, "I am the new parish priest, Father Baldwin. I have taken it upon myself to visit all the— er—that is, to acquaint myself with my congregation."

Delia knew he meant the infirm, the crippled, the blind, or deaf. It irritated her when people did not say what they meant, and further still when they singled her out. She wasn't a different species because she was ill; she wasn't stupid or strange; her mind was no withering violet, merely her body, and she could hardly help that.

Feigning ignorance, Delia said, "You want to see my mother and father then, not me."

"No, I—er, arranged with your mother, my meeting with you especially. She thought I might do you some good as you are incapable of attending services." Father Baldwin sat on the armchair quite close to Delia and patted her hand with his knuckley fingers.

Delia swallowed. She *could* go to services with the others, if they were willing to carry her, and brought her chair so that she might recline. But they didn't. She would make a spectacle, and mother avoided those like scarlet fever. They said it wasn't worth the hassle. But what they meant was *she* wasn't worth the hassle.

"How kind of you," Delia said without feeling.

"Yes, well," Father Baldwin ahemed in that meek manner which isn't really meek at all. "And how are we feeling today?"

Why did he say 'we' when he meant 'you'? "The same as every day," said Delia. Entirely too much like every day.

"I see, I see. Would you like me to read you a passage?" He said it as a statement, not a question, already fingering through the Holy tome.

But Delia quipped a quick, "No."

The priest jerked in surprise, nearly tearing a tissue-thin page of his Bible, and blinked as though the last thing he had expected was for a quiet, ailing girl to reject his reading of the Word. But you see, Delia liked the Psalms best and knew that was what the priest would read. It's what they always read. And she didn't want his sappy voice to ruin them. The words meant too much, ran too deep.

After a few lumpy swallows, Father Baldwin recovered, "How about a prayer?" He asked, hesitantly now.

"Please," Delia replied, but as he opened his mouth to do so, she cut in, "In the privacy of your own home, if you don't mind. After all, the Lord said to offer your prayers in your closet."

The minister blinked his cow eyes, knowing not what to say or do. He looked at his shoes, then at Delia's, which twisted inward a little on the elevated cushion of her reclining chair. Father Baldwin swallowed again, Adam's apple bobbing.

"Do—you require anything?"

Delia motioned to the table at her elbow, where a large tray held a glass water, a pot of chamomile, and plain biscuits. She pointed to the stack of books beside her chair, rising tall and wobbly, then to her ditty bag, a scroungy thing, with strips of fabric stitched to the outside like the tassels of a gypsy's skirt. The cloth was of varying types, leftovers saved from her mother's and sister's gowns. More waited inside to be made into something new: a doll dress, a coin purse, a hanky, whatever Delia invented for its new life.

The chair-bound child's gestures served as her only reply. Once done, she rested her hand in her lap and fixed her caller with a level eye. The priest nodded, licked his lips, and rose.

"Well, it is my prayer you find some relief." He patted her shoulder, and Delia shifted ever so slightly under its weight, but the movement caused the medical brace supporting her spine to pinch her underarm. Delia's lashes fluttered in a wince.

Thinking her expression was in direct response to his touch, the priest sniffed, affronted, and strode from the room, a cloud of insult in his wake.

Delia sighed and slumped as much as her brace would allow. She glanced around the empty room, where afternoon light cast beams through tall windows onto the patterned carpet. It was very quiet and still. The gramophone in the corner had long since completed its song, and Delia could not get up to put on another. She could ring her bell, and a servant would come, but she wanted to be alone. And yet, felt miserable in her loneliness. A cruel paradox.

Delia thought of the priest. He had done nothing wrong, but still, he annoyed her. Was this his fault or hers? She felt guilty for treating him poorly. He had only attempted to comfort her; perhaps his motivations were pure, not merely fueled by duty. Delia breathed heavily, her ribs pressing against the rigid brace. She rolled her aching neck and took up her ditty bag.

Sewing was her favorite way to distract her mind and pass the endless hours. It took enough concentration to blot out her discomfiture and dissatisfactions, but not enough to make her head spin. There was so much she could not do. Most things. But here was something she could. She could make things. Occasionally, she made clothing for her own dolls, but she spent most of her hours sewing for her sisters. For their female dolls, she fashioned elegant ball gowns, trimmed in lace and ribbon, ruffled pinafores, and flouncy morning dresses, and for the males: dashing suits, naval uniforms, and flashy piratical garb with buckles and stripes.

Delia wanted them to love her even though she couldn't play with them.

She was hemming a new set of pinstriped pantaloons when Miss Brown entered.

"I see he left in a hurry." Miss Brown said, dropping her h's, "Did you chase him away, naughty girl?"

Delia squirmed, "I'm tired, Miss Brown. Could you roll me to the window?"

"Oh, now," the maid tutted, "You know your parents say the sun ain't good for you. Takes your strength and darkens your skin, like."

"Just for a little while, please," Delia begged, longing to feel the sun's kiss, even if it was through panes of glass.

Miss Brown met Delia's sad gaze but could only hold out for a moment. She huffed in defeat and took hold of Delia's cumbersome chairback, hefting it over to the bay window.

"I'll return in a quarter of an hour to put you back, there's a dear." Miss Brown petted Delia's hair, which wasn't angelically white-blonde like Winnie and Anton's, Delia's youngest sister and eldest brother, or rich honey blonde like Viola and the twins, Chester and Fletcher. No, Delia's was a flat scraggly blonde, somewhere in between.

Miss Brown scuttled to the exit, checked both ways for Delia's mother, and darted away to attend her chores.

The sunbeams felt like the taste of candy on Delia's skin. She rolled up her dress's sleeve cuffs and let sunshine hug her in warmth. Delia detected the faint sound of giggling taunts and peered out the window into the garden beyond. Through leafy branches and stretching shrubs, she caught glimpses of her siblings, gamboling and playing in the grassy lawn between the flower beds.

Fletcher and Chester played soldier men, and Delia knew it wouldn't be long before they wound up tackling one another. Winnie sat in a wide wicker basket playing with her doll, struggling to change its dress into one Delia had sewn. She was whining for Viola to help, to join her play, but her elder sister was busy helping Anton build a fort out of the oak branches the gardener had just trimmed. Beneath said tree slept their governess, Miss Twissletwit, with a book splayed open on her voluptuous chest.

Delia's eyes stung, so she closed them, but it did nothing to dampen the sound of their merriment. She couldn't decide whether she liked hearing them or whether the pain of it outweighed the pleasure.

She imagined being out there with them, the things she would do to improve the fort, how she would bring Winnie into its center, and they'd build the house around her like the Wendy House in Peter Pan. She would make fairy dolls out of sticks and leaves, tying them together with long grasses. They would make daisy crowns and necklaces, skip and chase one another until dinner.

Delia stopped then. She could not bear it. Taking up the pantaloons, Delia began to stitch fiercely, despite her fuzzy vision and feeling dreadful. So intent was Delia on trying to see straight that she did not perceive her sibling's approach until they galloped across the threshold, startling her with their shouts of protest and complaint. Delia sucked her pricked finger as Governess Twissletwit herded them into the nursery like the distractible kittens they were, chiding the twins, for they had indeed gotten into a tussle, tearing their best blue trousers. In their escalating kerfuffle, Winnie must have gotten the nudge for her stockings were soiled with mud, and she was wailing.

The wave of stimuli overwhelmed Delia, the sudden noise, the activity, catching her unaware. Her muscles tensed involuntarily, neck throbbing, head swimming. Governess Twissletwit caught sight of Delia struggling by the window and shushed her charges, shooing them into the adjacent bedroom where the clothing wardrobes were kept.

"No, Miss Twitty! Wait!" Winnie broke away from the educator's grasp and sped toward Delia, holding something out to her. She snuffled back her tears and stated proudly in her high-pitched voice. "It's a wish flower, for you."

"A dandelion," corrected Viola from the bedroom doorway.

"Yes, a dandywion." Winnie said, as though she knew this already, "They make wishes come true if you bwow off all the fwuff in one go. I twied this many times," she held up seven fingers, "and got dizzy, but I couldn't get them all!" She cupped her hands and whispered loudly into Delia's ear, "I puwed all of them off one, but Viowa says that doesn't count."

Miss Twissletwit ordered Winnie to come that instant before she got mud on Delia's dress, and the little girl obeyed. Delia was sad to see her go but also relieved. Her littlest sister was loud and energetic and liked to be very close to people when she talked in her squeaky four-year-old voice.

Once her siblings were tucked away in the adjoining room, Delia gazed at the flower in her hand. The dandelion's bright green stem felt soft and furry, its top a plume, fluffy and white, like a thousand baby feathers.

A wish. One wish.

Delia regarded her body—frail, pale, and every inch of it aching. She closed her eyes. And with every ounce of force that was in her, Delia blew. She waited, swirling with dizziness, then winked one hopeful eye open. There, on the edge of the bumpy white knob, clung a single tufted seed, wavering, wavering. Delia held her breath. *Please, oh please.*

Bang! went the nursery door, and the rattling shake was just enough to unhinge the last seed and set it free. It drifted into the air in front of Delia's nose. She smiled. But the smile soon faded as her father barged into the room.

"Miss Twissletwit!" He shouted, his mustachios twitching, "What is the meaning of this? There are mud drippings all through the house! Did you not remove the children's soiled belongings before entering? They should not get this messy in the first place. Well behaved children DO NOT roll about like pigs!"

Miss Twissletwit reappeared in the interconnecting doorway, looking harried. Chester stood at her elbow without pants on, Fletcher still wore his torn pair, and one leg of Winnie's muddy stockings dangled on the ground.

Their father gasped, "Their mother has ladies arriving for the garden party any minute! The governor's wife will be there, and we must make a good impression! The children are to make an appearance and look at them! Just look at them! A horde of little beggars, that's what they look like. And another thing—" he paused, catching sight of Delia framed in window light, "I say! What's this?"

Delia jerked, her breath catching.

"What are you doing in the glaring sun?" Her father demanded.

Miss Brown waltzed up to the open nursery door, froze, eyes widening at the confrontation underway, and hurried past.

"I—" Delia began, but her father was already careening her away from the glow and into the dismal shade of the room.

"You know the sun is bad for you! Besides, you'll freckle. And freckles are unseemly."

Delia spoke, scarcely above a whisper, "Viola and Winnie go in the sun."

"They are healthy, besides they wear hats and gloves. What is this on the carpet? Weeds! Great Scott, Miss Twissletwit, are we raising barbarians? What am I doing? I don't have time for this. I must ensure the lawn seating is properly arranged! Miss Twissletwit. Get things in hand." With a huff and a twitch, Delia's father rushed away to overthink the place card settings.

His stress left Delia blinking and panting, her neck, shoulders, and back cramping terribly. Meanwhile, Miss Twissletwit shoved her charges back into the other room and closed the door firmly behind her. Closing her out again.

Delia's empty eyes stared at the ceiling as she calmed her breath and did what she could to unclench her body. Saltwater tears formed in the corners of her eyes, dribbling into her hair.

If only her wish would come true. What wouldn't she give, if only it would come true.

That night, Delia slept fitfully. But then, she always did. Her brace was uncomfortable to lay in, and she was never allowed to take it off. Sometime in the night, she woke hungry, not having eaten enough during the day. She nibbled the stale biscuits on her nightstand and sipped

the lukewarm milk, but then her tummy hurt, and she lay for an endless stretch in the dark of the nursery, watching the flicker of the night oil lamp play on the patterned wallpaper.

Just as she was certain dawn must be near, Delia drifted off. It felt as though she had scarcely lost her way to sleep when something soft and cool touched her arm and a melodic voice with all the sweetness of spring called:

"Wake, oh wake, my darling dear, and see what your dream has brought you!"

Surprised at hearing a stranger's voice, Delia popped her peepers wide. Bending over her was the strangest being she had ever seen. His face was white, and a bob of white covered the top of his head. His body was long, thin, and green, and his arms and legs looked like—well, like leaves.

Delia sat up lightning fast, "What are you?"

"I am the Dandelion Lord, but you may call me Dandy. I'm not one for titles." His smile was so winsome it banished her unease in an instant. "Come now, little one. I have granted your wish! Do stand up and try it out."

Before she had another moment to think, Dandy helped her to her feet. But what was this? She wasn't dizzy! Not in the slightest! Her strong legs stood steady on a carpet of long, fresh grass.

"Where…" Delia *was* going to ask where they were, but suddenly that didn't seem to matter. She was standing, and she felt… good! She took a deep, hearty breath. Her ribs were free, her brace was gone, her back felt no discomfort at all. Delia wiggled her toes and rolled her

arms, admiring them in the sunlight. Her skin glowed with color and life, and her heart beat steady and firm with her growing excitement.

"What has happened to me?" She asked in wonderment. "I'm- I'm well!"

"I told you," laughed Dandy. "I granted your dandelion wish!"

Delia looked down at her body, feeling a surge of energy well up inside her. She touched her dress, a colorful array of patterned cloth, pieces and layers, ribbons and lace, with a fantastically twirly skirt. Delia beamed and spun like a ballerina, her long hair fanning out, now as bright and silky as sunshine on dewy buttercups. Her very soul brimmed with life. She felt indescribable, euphoric, bold, wild, free.

"What shall I do first? Oh, what shall I do? I cannot believe it! I have dreamed of this so many times, but never what to do first!" Delia's joy rose to bursting so she jumped and skipped circles around the dandelion man.

"Everything!" Dandy laughed, "Everything and nothing. You can do anything you like in Dreamland!" he announced with a flourish.

Delia looked out across the meadow. All around, near and far, on hills, in valleys, up trees, walking lanes, were people overflowing with glee. Loved ones reunited, husbands and wives, Papas and daughters, boys and their long lost pups. Some individuals rolled in piles of money. Others made white powder angels in a snowy Christmas wonderland. Some ate mountains of ice cream without getting tummy aches or swam in a great pond of chocolate milk. Delia saw athletes on pedestals receiving shiny golden trophies to ruckus choruses of 'for she's a jolly good fellow.' Some children turned into mermaids or flew or talked to animals. The land

thrummed with music, laughter, and happy chatter, effervescent with beauty and enchantment and love.

It was pure wonderment.

Hand in hand, Dandy and Delia danced and sang through the meadow of wildflowers, greeting the other wishers as they went. Dandy told her about the other guardians of wishes and dreams and pointed them out to her as they passed. There was the Wishbone Lord, a jolly skeleton who clattered when he frolicked; the Genie Prince, a jade man wearing many beads and ornaments; the Overseer of Wells and Fountains, a bubbly woman with laughter like a brook; and—Dandy's face went dreamy when he gazed upon her—Starlight, a celestial lady, with shimmering white skin, like that of opals and diamonds.

"And ruling over all of us," Dandy added with reverence, "Is the King of all Goodness."

Delia plucked a perfectly plump raspberry from a bush as they capered onto a wandering path , "Where is he?" She asked, popping the fruit into her mouth, the tart juice coloring her lips and tongue. Delia liked the sound of such a king and wanted to meet him.

"Oh, He is busy running the universe."

Delia paused her chewing for a moment, thinking, "If the King of all Goodness is running the universe, then why aren't all things good?"

They passed an ice sculptor standing in a field of his creations: dancing figures, fairies, and sea creatures that seemed to swim on the air, sparkling with reflected light.

Dandy bowed his head politely as they walked by, then answered Delia in a serious tone, "It's far more complicated than that, I'm afraid, deary dear. But the King of all Goodness is a master strategist. So wise is He, yes, you can trust Him that all will be good in the end."

Delia looked down at her bare feet, shuffling through the snow of the winterland, yet feeling not a smidgen of discomfort. "When I made my wish, I thought I would be healthy in real life, at home."

"Oh no," replied Dandy, "If you were meant to be healthy in real life, you would be."

Ahead, at a bend in the lane, Delia spied two sisters crying happily and hugging one another's necks. "Where is my family, Dandy?"

"They weren't a part of your wish, you see. They aren't here."

This concerned Delia, but she was soon distracted from her worry, for they had arrived at the edge of a small, brightly-colored, hockety-pockety, strangely wonderful village. Vendors everywhere sold fantastic gizmos, succulent sweets, and mythical pets: dragons, griffins, and pegasi. Every costume in the bustling crowd was wildly unique. Buttons covered some, others, bows, bells, or tassels. Some wore ball gowns, others only their underwear. But no matter the dress, everyone everywhere was merry and smiling as if every moment was a lark, and they the keepers of it.

Dandy and Delia turned cartwheels in the square, and a shopkeeper clothed in flowers from her head to her toes gave Delia a nosegay of lilies. Thanking the good lady, she tucked the flowers into the waist of her tatty dress before she and Dandy carried on their way.

On the far side of the merry town, they came to a creek of strawberry lemonade, where they splashed and hopped about like frogs. Once they grew exhausted from the play, they flopped onto the shore with contented sighs. The fatigue Delia now felt was nothing like what she was used to when the earth dragged her down, down, down against her will. No, this felt as though her muscles had taken a large, fresh breath of brisk clean air and now let it out luxuriously.

Delia lay on her back, face alight with sweet bliss, and watched the cotton candy clouds drift by in flavors of cherry, orange, and grape.

Every iota of this world thrummed, hummed, and blossomed. Warbler's warbled, song sparrows sang, and faraway children chanted a playful rhyme. Overhead flew a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Over its rim appeared a red-headed boy, smiling with glee. He tossed Delia a present by parachute. Delighted, she caught it and undid the green velvet wrapping, uncovering a softer-than-air teddy bear holding a peppermint stick. She hugged the teddy and sucked the peppermint and thought that Dreamland couldn't be any better if it tried.

Unless...

Delia looked down at her skirt absently and noticed what she had not before. Her eclectic frock wasn't fashioned out of any old scraps. No, now that she looked closer, she recognized every piece. The lace of her mother's best gown. The handkerchief she had embroidered for her father. The striped fabric of her brother's sailor suits. Some polka dot cloth from the horsey she had sewn them. And scattered throughout, strips of material from all the dresses she had ever made Viola and Winnie.

"Won't I ever see them again?" Delia asked Dandy, and he knew just who she meant.

"Not if you stay here, I'm afraid."

"I have a choice, then? Whether to stay or return?"

Dandy nodded. Delia contemplated this awhile, fingering a string of beads.

"Won't they miss me if I stay?"

Dandy answered, "I can make them forget. But they'll be worse off without you."

"How so? I didn't do anything while I was there, Dandy. I was too sick."

"You taught your brothers and sisters to think about others, to be considerate of others' feelings and thoughts. They aren't good at it yet, but they're improving. You taught your mother and father to realize they cannot control everything, that they need to rely on someone bigger and better and stronger and wiser. Those are very important things for them to learn."

Delia felt confused, "But I haven't taught anybody any lessons."

"Not like your Miss Twissletwit. But there are different kinds of lessons. You teach them just by being there, by being you. You teach them bravery and goodness when you don't feel well and still smile and do nice things for them. You teach them patience by sitting in your chair every day, and gratefulness when you say thank you for the smallest things. You change them for the better, Delia dear. Because of you, they go out into the world and likewise change others, and on and on it goes. So really, you are quite pivotal."

Delia had never thought that people might need her. She always seemed to need them for everything; it was nice to be needed in return.

"But Dandy," she said, "It's so terribly hard living there. I feel so awful all the time. I'm left out of everything fun. I'm lonely. And I—I just don't understand why it has to be that way."

Dandy folded his leafy arms over his leafy knees, like sepals over a rosebud, "Life is made of mysteries, darling dear, most of which you won't find the answers to. But it's not for you to try and search them all out. All you are to do is the best with what you are given, and someday, someday, the King of all Goodness will show you the answers and you will see that every little bit made sense after all."

Delia frowned, "I don't much like waiting."

Dandy chuckled, "No human does! But it will be worth it in the end all the same, you'll see. The King said so. And if ever there is one to be trusted, it's Him."

Delia pondered this quietly on the banks of the creek for a long while, splashing her feet in the pale pink water, enjoying the delicious way the bubbles tickled her toes. She thought about her life before, how when she needed help her father would see to it, her mother would dote on her, and her brothers and sisters would bring her little presents. They always ensured she was well taken care of. It would have been terrible if she had needed them, and they had not been there.

"I think Dandy," Delia swallowed hard, "I think I will go back. I cannot fully enjoy Dreamland, knowing they need me there."

Dandy nodded soberly, but his throat wobbled too much for words. The tiger lily sun began to set on Dreamland, casting rays of orange and glittering gold across the verdant countryside. Dandy led Delia to a bed of purple wisteria fronds and snuggled her in warm. The stars soon filled the night sky, dazzlingly bright, like sugar crystals in the heavens. Delia blinked sleepily as Starlight wafted through the valley, her angelic voice weaving a lullaby into the peaceful night.

Dandy sat beside Delia, stroking her hair with his light leaf touch, and just as she was drifting into slumber, he whispered in her ear, "Because of your selfless choice, my dear, I'll grant you an amendment. Every full moon, I'll return for you, that you may have one glorious day in Dreamland. Until then, feel each small joy, my child. Sleep now, sleep."

Delia was awakened by a kiss on her nose. The indigo haze of predawn filled the nursery, and beside her bed, quite close, stood Winnie, glancing furtively over her little shoulders. A sly grin spread over her chubby cheeks as she pulled a jam jar from beneath her nightgown.

"Shh, let's eat it, Dewia, before Miss Twitty wakes up!"

Delia struggled to sit up. The aches had returned to her frail, pallid body, but so had love.

Delia took a spoon from Winnie's sticky fingers, and as she dipped it into the blueberry jam, she noticed that by her pillow lay a single dandelion flower.

The End